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Renee Neely

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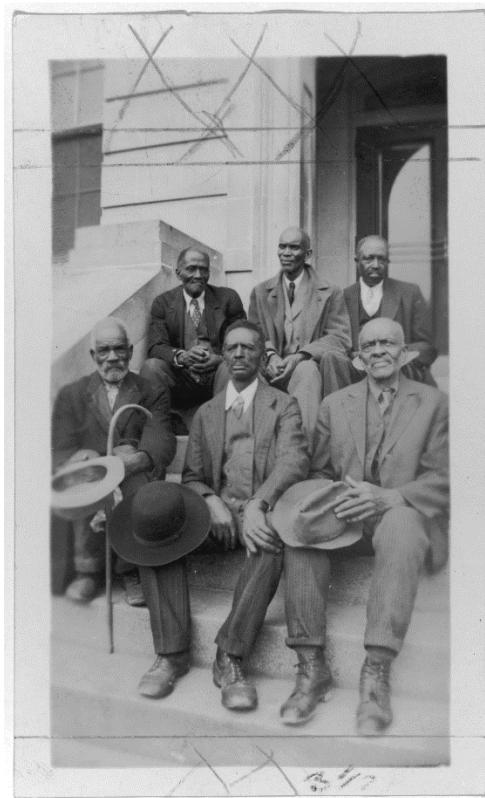
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How Archives Shape our Collective Memory: A Re-examination of the Library of Congress' American Memory Collection of The 1936-1938 Federal Writers Project's Collection of Former Slave Narratives and Concomitant Questions of African American Cultural Knowledge Production

Renee Neely



Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalogue (PPOC):
Title: Attendants at Old Slave Day, Southern Pines (NC) (April 8, 1937)
silver gelatin print (title transcribed from item) photographer not listed
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/99615435/>

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Terry Cook, who I had hoped to one day meet. Cook's writings and those co-authored with Joan Schwartz have greatly influenced my professional vision.

Introduction

I am developing a qualitative case study that re-examines the Library of Congress' American Memory Collection titled: *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves* looking specifically at how socio-political perceptions surrounding the Collection's origins, online presence and categorization of these particular oral histories, marginalize their use as primary sources.

The gathering of oral histories of formerly enslaved African Americans during the Depression era was one of many relief initiatives created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's

63 How Archives Shape Our Collective Memory: A Re-examination of the Library of Congress' American Memory Collection of the 1936-1938 Federal Writers Project's Collection of Former Slave Narratives and Concomitant Questions of African American Cultural Knowledge Production

New Deal, Works Progress Administration (WPA).¹ The Federal Writers' Project (FWP)² gave employment to out-of-work writers. This branch was directly responsible for the collection and selection of interviews that became the current Library of Congress' Collection.

This study is not a criticism of the Collection or its creators. The expansiveness and scope of the project is a testament to the capacity of archives to preserve records of pivotal moments in our history. This outweighs inconsistencies or historically framed weaknesses. I respectfully acknowledge the gap between the theory of practice and "boots on the ground" decision making that determines the administration of our smallest to most prestigious repositories. This Collection offers an opportunity to reflect on issues that we, as archivists must recognize in order to better serve our institutions, users of our collections, and the historical record.

The following research questions are the focus of this examination:

- Did FWP policy and perceptions in the collection of the narratives further marginalize those persons who consented to detail their private lives under American slavery?
- How does the designation of folklife or folk history reflect on the categorization of materials in the realm of archivy?
- How might a critical re-examination of the Collection, focusing on a broader non-textual paradigm offer new insights into African American cultural knowledge production?

Power Relationships Intrinsic in Archival Practice – The Myth of Neutrality

Before discussing the FWP's Collection of former slave narratives, something must be said about the outcome of archival practice. The power to determine what is remembered and what is forgotten is at the core of archivalization.³

We recognize the nineteenth century notion of the archivist as an unbiased record keeper, yet responsible for the selection of records of enduring value as a paradox:

"The refusal of the archival profession to acknowledge the power relations embedded in the archival enterprise carries a concomitant abdication of responsibility for the consequences of the exercise of that power, and in turn serious consequences for understanding and carrying the role of archives in an ever-changing present ..."⁴

¹ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/dustbowl-wpa>.

² The administration of the project was by the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) although officially under the overarching Works Progress Administration (WPA). The FWP will be mentioned throughout this paper. The referenced Library of Congress literature and other sources use both entities interchangeably.

³ Anneli Sundqvist, "Documentation Practices and Recordkeeping: A Matter of Trust Or Distrust?," *Archival Science* 11, no. 3 (11, 2011): 277-291.

⁴ Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1-2 (2002): 1-19.

Users of archives have an expectation of trust. Archival practitioners have a responsibility to the users of their repositories. Nevertheless we must acknowledge the historical reality that archivists have been participants in promoting the unethical actions of the institutions they serve.

The Value of Collection Re-examination

The decision that something is worthy of archiving is the first step in a value-driven process that includes accessioning, surveying, arrangement, assigning metadata, cataloging and preservation before materials are made available to users. Once in place, this very process reinforces within the historical record, how materials are viewed – elevated or dismissed.

The following illustrate three examples of this relationship:

- The case wherein the identities of the Kven and Sámi peoples of northern Norway were literally relegated to anonymity within the Norwegian National Archive.⁵ Hundreds of records had not been labeled or cataloged because there were not in Norwegian languages. The collections remained unprocessed until the project National Minorities in Public Records processed those documents written in the Sámi and Kven languages, restoring visibility to their presence in Norwegian national history.
- As the government of South Africa continues to transition from opacity to transparency, its State Archive Service (SAS) continues to play a major role. Historically, the apartheid nationalist presence was achieved through records. Records controlled every aspect of citizens' lives through classification, employment, surveillance, associations and property. Additionally that presence permeated all aspects of knowledge facilitation. In viewing this example – can we regard SAS archivists as impartial record keepers? We can try to understand this as a complex model of the evolving archival profession in South Africa.⁶
- Often a re-examination of acquisition policy is necessary. The University of Michigan, Bentley Historical Library's Collection on religion reflected only white Protestant denominations. Upon re-examination of the Collection, a field study was conducted and 41 African American churches in the Detroit area were contacted in order to collect and include their church records. The library's successful re-examination of its acquisition policy resulted in a Collection more reflective of the diverse religious communities in its actual population.⁷

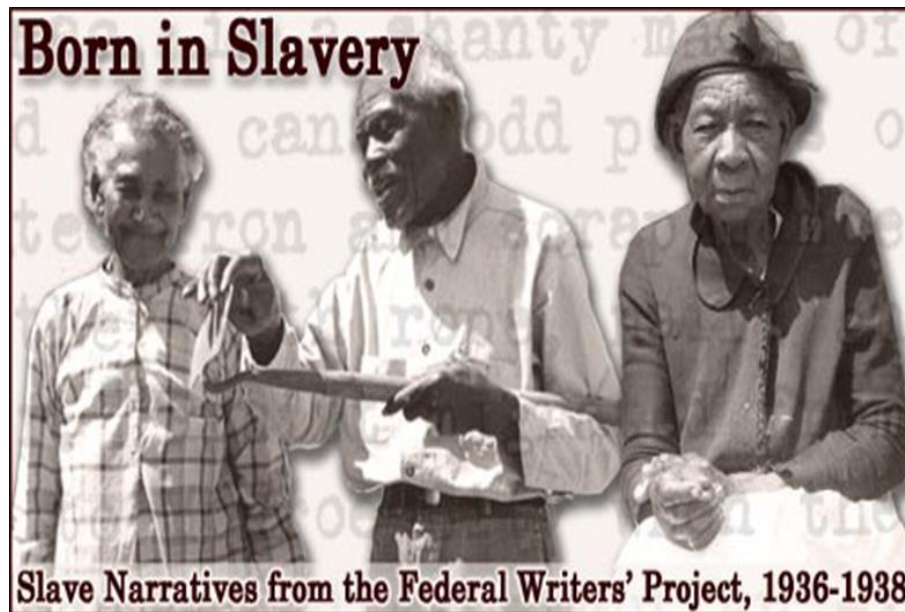
The FWP Collection of former slaves' oral histories would benefit by a critical re-examination of its online presence; a broader focus on the cultural and material knowledge production evidenced within the narratives; and lastly re-thinking the marginalized designation of eye witness and lived accounts of American slavery as folk history.

⁵ Kaisa Maliniemi, "Public Records and Minorities: Problems and Possibilities for Sámi and Kven," *Archival Science* 9, no. 1 (2009): 15-27.

⁶ Verne Harris, "The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 63-86.

⁷ Ian Johnston, "Whose History is it Anyway?" *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 22, no. 2 (2001): 213-229.

How Archives Shape Our Collective Memory: A Re-examination of the Library of Congress' American Memory Collection of the 1936-1938 Federal Writers' Project's Collection of Former Slave Narratives and Concomitant Questions of African American Cultural Knowledge Production



Library of Congress, Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>



Miss Adeline Cunningham



Mr. William Adams



Miss Callie Sheperd

*Note the title and recall that these people are no longer slaves.
Note the difference in image perception.*

Motivations Behind the Collection – Questions of Provenance

The motivations behind this collection are multi-layered and problematic. In 1936 American slavery had theoretically been over for 71 years. Yet the climate of “respectable

racism” evidenced by de facto segregation or Jim Crow, permeated popular culture and the academy:

“Just as the antebellum slave narratives had gained prominence in reaction to the Southern defense of slavery, so interest in the latter-day slave narrative was stimulated by the dominant attitudes toward the slave regime that prevailed in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Seldom before or since has racism been so pervasive and so academically respectable in the United States. The assumption of the innate and inherited inferiority of non-Anglo-Saxon racial and ethnic groups permeated and dominated white intellectual and popular thought. Social, scientific, and historical thought both mirrored and reinforced this racism.”⁸

Add to this the reality that the population of those who had survived slavery was rapidly diminishing in the 1930s.

Documenting the life histories of former enslaved individuals did not originate with the FWP. A substantial number of oral histories had been collected in 1928 by Ophelia Settle Egypt, working with Charles S. Johnson, then head of the Department of Research at Fisk University, later its first African American President⁹. The continuation of this research, with the goal of employment and relief for Negro¹⁰ graduate students, was pitched to FERA,¹¹ by Lawrence Reddick, a former student of Johnson. Ironically, this is not what happened.



Title: Uncle Rich Brown and John A. Lomax (left) at the home of Mrs. Julia Killingsworth near Sumterville, Alabama

(Oct. 1940), photographer: Ruby T. Lomax

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2007660082/>

John Avery Lomax, a popular music folklorist of the time, was recruited to head the program. Lomax was not a historian or an archivist. He was known for his interest in collecting

⁸ Yetman, Introduction to the Slaver Narratives, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro04.html>

⁹ Johnson, became the first African American elected Vice President of the American Sociological Society and served on Roosevelt's U.S. Committee on Farm Tenancy, <http://www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/voices/vfsbio.html#CJ.html>

¹⁰ Negro is used throughout this study in its historical context and as cited in period literature, and original source materials.

¹¹ FERA (Federal Emergency Relief Administration), FWP's predecessor.

67 How Archives Shape Our Collective Memory: A Re-examination of the Library
of Congress' American Memory Collection of the 1936-1938 Federal Writers
Project's Collection of Former Slave Narratives and Concomitant Questions
of African American Cultural Knowledge Production

Negro music throughout the rural south. Lomax designed and directed the project as an expansion of his interest in folklife. This seriously compromised future perceptions of the narratives as primary source accounts of lived experiences and not charming stories of a by gone past.

Lomax created a detailed questionnaire with instructions for interviewers.¹² Here we must consider the black and white social dynamic of the era. The text of the interviews have gross discrepancies in language. This ranged from interviewers' attempts to rewrite the person's responses in their version of Negro dialect, to a complete rewriting of the text as their own interpretations of what was said. Please note that the majority of interviewers were southern whites not trained to take oral histories.

In striking contrast, oral histories taken by black interviewers were challenged by the FWP as being unprofessional. The candid responses given by former slaves to interviewers of their race were significantly different in content and tone than their responses to white interviewers, many of whom were from families of former slave owners.¹³ This discrepancy cannot be underestimated. Their polite responses could be interpreted as resonating former slave/master dynamics and although some historians have labeled this as incongruous, it speaks to the deep psychological scars and on-going victimization of the slave system.

The Office of Negro Affairs,¹⁴ formed to act as watchdog on the project's hiring of Negro writers, was headed by Sterling Brown, poet and Professor of English at Howard University. Lomax's lack of collaboration with that Office caused constant conflict with the projects direction.

A major concern when examining the project's provenance is the FWP's delegation of its administration to branches throughout the states. The oral histories were edited on the state level, and then sent to the federal office for inclusion in the final project. We cannot assess how much this compromised the original texts.

History vs Folklore - Identity Mapping in the Realm of Archivy

Official Title of the Collection: Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves.

In the 1936 segregated south, antebellum nostalgia was experiencing a passionate revival. Just as popular culture saturates our lives today, indeed, it permeated Depression era social consciousness, as evidenced in films such as "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm" (1938) and "Gone with the Wind" (1939). Ironically, the liberating voice of pre-Civil War slave narratives had been marginalized in value to the rambling reminiscences of former slaves, many now in their nineties, who had lived the experience, but could not possibly offer anything valuable to the

¹² See Lomax Questionnaire, *Supplementary Instructions #9E*, under *Administration*, 19, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=001/mesn001.db&recNum=17>.

¹³ Norman Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly* 19, no. 32 (Autumn, 1967): 534-553.

¹⁴ Interview with Sterling Brown at Yale Univ., 1979 by William Ferris, *The Storied South, Voices of Writers and Artists*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 104 and CD of original audio recording.

discourse on slavery:

“By far the most profound influence upon the historical study of slavery during this period was the writings of Ulrich B. Phillips, whose monumental *American Negro Slavery* established him as the leading authority on the subject.... The portrait of slavery that emerged from this work bore a striking resemblance to that espoused by proslavery apologists before the Civil War. It minimized the severity of American slavery, extolled its civilizing and Christianizing functions, and reasserted the notion that the slave was submissive rather than defiant. The overall effect was a verification of the “plantation myth” and a confirmation of what Stanley M. Elkins has termed the “Sambo” image of the slave ...”¹⁵

This socio-political background framed the FWP project. The oral histories were to become a component of a larger series of books, similar to travelogues, depicting the American landscape.¹⁶

There is no specific definition for folk history, yet the idea of folklore (Lomax’s specialty) is in simple terms: traditional customs, tales, or art forms preserved among a people; an often unsupported notion, story, or saying that is widely circulated.¹⁷ This study questions the placement of the Collection under folklike as a misnomer, and further relegating its place in the historic record.

Having Lomax, a noted folklorist, map the scope and breath of a project dealing with survivors of slavery, raises the question of how deep-seated socio-political motivations informed the valuation of these histories and their end product, that became the current American Memory Collection.

Concomitant Questions of African American Cultural Knowledge Production

The reward of archival research is always the emergence of unexpected topics that can expand and enrich a study’s direction. My work with this collection began with the narratives compiled by the Virginia Writer’s Project (VWP). The VWP, along with the projects in Louisiana and Florida, formed the all Negro units of the FWP.¹⁸ Under the direction of Hampton Institute Professor Roscoe E. Lewis, this became the only completed and fully documented project of the FWP’s collection of former slave narratives, resulting in the book *The Negro in Virginia*.¹⁹

The use of the narratives as insight into the historical record extends into areas of cultural knowledge production that need further investigation. The industry of skilled slave artisans in every area of expectation, is detailed in the recounting of this labor in the narratives. There were no random patterns of events, as survivors documented their lives as part of the slave economy. A critical re- thinking about their indigenous knowledge, and its non-textual episteme, expands our understanding of the value of these narratives as primary sources.

¹⁵ Yetman, Introduction to the Slaver Narratives, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro04.html>.

¹⁶ This project was not completed as initially designed, however, further details are being investigated in this case studies’ ongoing research.

¹⁷ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/folklore>.

¹⁸ Projects in these states require further investigation.

¹⁹ Roscoe E. Lewis, editor, *The Negro in Virginia*, (New York City: Hastings House, 1940).

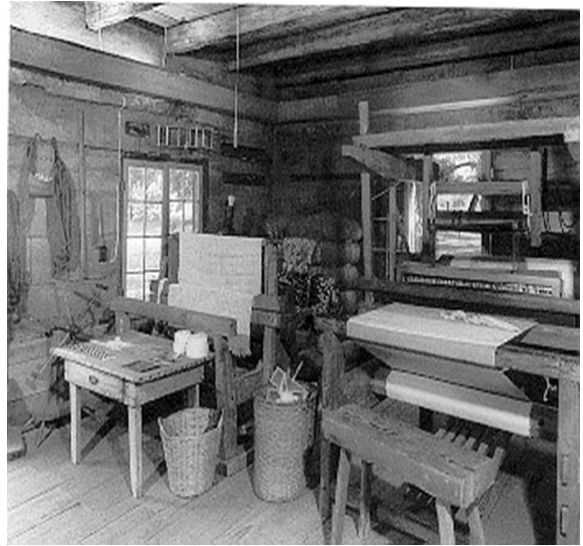
69 How Archives Shape Our Collective Memory: A Re-examination of the Library of Congress' American Memory Collection of the 1936-1938 Federal Writers Project's Collection of Former Slave Narratives and Concomitant Questions of African American Cultural Knowledge Production

Textile production is one of many areas of labor and legacy charted throughout the narratives:

Interior of a loom house on Melrose Plantation

Jamie Leigh, Undergraduate Student, American Studies Program, University of Virginia

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug97/quilt/atrads.html>



Title: *Sewing a quilt. Gees Bend, Alabama*; Other Title: *Jennie Pettway and another girl with the quilter Jorena Pettway* (April 1937)

Library of Congress: Farm Security Administration - Office of War Information photographer: Arthur Rothstein

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa2000006962/PP/>

The continued investigation of this case study plans to incorporate enslaved knowledge production centers in the areas of architecture, culinary arts, iron, copper and tin smithing, portraiture and ceramics. Additionally, the photographic archive that parallels the Collection merits exploration.

Final Compilation and Current Status of Collection

The FWP project was disbanded in 1939 on the eve of World War II:

“... the narratives lay dormant for several years. It appeared that they might be relegated to permanent archival oblivion in each of the respective states... The processing of these materials was directed by Benjamin A. Botkin, a

noted folklorist who had succeeded John A. Lomax as Folklore Editor of the Writers' Project ...The task of processing the narratives initially involved their appraisal, indexing and arrangement alphabetically by individual informant and state. The appraisal of each individual narrative proved an excessively elaborate procedure and was abandoned after nearly four-fifths of the entire Collection had been evaluated. Unfortunately, the important task of indexing the Collection was suspended as well, thus depriving scholars of a feature which would have greatly facilitated its use."²⁰

The Collection's final processing began in 1940 (microfilm), continued into the 1970s, and was completed online in 2001.²¹ Available online are 2,300 interviews in 16 volumes categorized by state, and 250 of the 500 accompanying photographs and related documents.

Conclusion

None of us has experienced American slavery, nor do we know anything of its day-to-day mechanisms. If for no other reason, we must respect and acknowledge these first hand accounts as valuable records of that regime.

The Collection is extremely problematic, largely based on perceptions surrounding its historical context, provenance, categorization as folk history, and negligence in the management of records. The goal of collection re-examination is not criticism, but an investigation of how, as archivists, our careful attention to challenging materials of enduring value can help us better serve our institutions and users of our collections. The historical record is our collective memory. For survivors of American slavery -- that record documents their path from Slave -- to Citizen -- to Human.

Renée Elizabeth Neely is the Research and Public Engagement Coordinator for the Rhode Island Historical Society. She is a Brown University alumna, with an AB in English Literature and Cultures. She has a M.Sc. in Library and Information Science from Simmons College, with a concentration in archival practice. She has worked as project archivist and co-curator for the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice at Brown. She has published in *Archival Outlook*, and *Callaloo, A Journal of African Diaspora Arts and Letters*. Renée is a sculptor.

²⁰ Norman Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly*, 19, no. 32 (Autumn, 1967).

²¹ Library of Congress, "Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938. Digital collection made available by funding from Citigroup in 2001, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>.